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Soviet Reported Acting to Begin New Atom Tests

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WASHINGTON, March 17 — The Soviet Union has started preparations for the possible resumption of nuclear weapons testing, Reagan Administration officials said today.

Satellite reconnaissance photographs show the Soviet Union has been digging holes and tunnels in which nuclear explosives can be placed and moving monitoring equipment into a test area, according to Administration experts who have reviewed classified United States intelligence reports.

The Soviet Union announced a moratorium on underground tests on July 30, 1985, several days after it conducted such a test. The moratorium initially was to last through the end of the year. Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, later extended the moratorium through March. Most recently, he said the Soviet Union would continue the moratorium until the United States conducted its next nuclear test.

Longtime Preparations Cited

"They have been involved in making preparations for follow-on testing from the very beginning," of the moratorium, one Administration official asserted today.

The Soviet Union has not held any tests since July. The United States, which declined to join the moratorium, held its most recent announced test in December.

An Administration official said today that the United States testing schedule had been adjusted to give the Soviet Union time to consider the United

States proposal to visit a test site.

"There are no technical problems in the program," the official said. "There are political motivations in that we would like to keep the atmosphere conducive for a possible favorable Soviet response."

In recent years, the United States has held tests earlier in the year.

President Reagan has invited Soviet observers to a test planned for the third week of April.

Explanations of Move Vary

American Government experts offered several explanations for the Soviet test preparations.

One said the Soviet actions could be interpreted as a prudent hedge against the likelihood that the Reagan Administration would continue to reject the Soviet-proposed ban on testing.

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"You could interpret it as an indication that they do not anticipate that we will join them," one expert said.

Another official said the planning suggested the Soviet moratorium was a public relations gesture and not a serious proposal.

"It says to me that they regard testing as a continuing requirement," said one official. "They know we won't stop testing. They want testing to go on and to pin the blame on us."

Government officials also offered different assessments of how long it would take the Soviet Union to finish the preparations. One said it would take another two to three weeks.

Another official said the Soviet Union could complete preparations within two weeks if a special effort was made to speed up the work.

In recent years, the Soviet Union has conducted about 24 nuclear explosions annually, about 14 of which were usually underground weapons tests, according to a recent study by the Natural Resources Defense Council. The rest of the explosions are considered to be peaceful ones used for construction purposes.

The study is a report by a variety of scientific institutions and declassified United States Government documents.

Under American policy, not all Soviet and United States tests are disclosed.

In recent years, the Soviet Union and the United States have argued often about nuclear tests.

The Soviet Union has called on the United States to stop testing and to ratify two 1970's treaties that limit the size of underground nuclear explosions, the only kind permitted.